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ABSTRACT

An experimental program was undertaken to determine the effects of attitude and reading achievement on writing, to ascertain if intervention could improve writing achievement and attitude, and to predict success in the program on the basis of an attitude inventory that measured need for structure and tolerance of ambiguity. Subjects were 15 boys and 11 girls in an English 11 class. Students were pretested for reading and writing achievement and attitudes toward writing and structure. The program consisted of traditional as well as original activities for 1 hour a week for 10 weeks. Students completed a variety of writing assignments: (1) a first person perspective on a case study, (2) a third person autobiography, (3) a letter of application for a job, (4) a conclusion to an unfinished story, (5) a resume of a newspaper article and a first person account based on it, and (6) a first person explanation of an enigmatic short story written in the third person. Other activities included uninterrupted sustained silent writing in journals, spelling and listening tests, and language experience sessions. Results of posttests indicated that vocabulary scores and course marks were significantly correlated, students with high reading scores had low needs for structure (and vice versa), and comprehension scores and attitude toward writing were significantly correlated. (The attitude survey's instruments are included.) (JL)

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A Field-based Experiment on Composition Writing

There is general concern, in both the public and educational communities, for what is perceived to be a decline in standards of student writing. In order to examine a sample of writing an experimental program was undertaken. Its objectives were:

1) to ascertain if intervention could improve writing (quality and quantity)
2) to determine if attitude to writing was a significant factor in writing achievement
3) to attempt to improve attitude toward writing
4) to discover if reading achievement predicted writing achievement
5) to predict success in the program on the basis of an attitude inventory which measured need for structure and tolerance of ambiguity.

In order to provide baseline data, students were pretested for reading and writing achievement and attitudes to writing and structure - ambiguity. The Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test, Level F, Form 1, was administered. Vocabulary and Comprehension scores were totalled and converted to stanines. The results were:

Stanine 1 - 7 students
Stanine 2 - 8 students
Stanine 3 - 5 students
Stanine 4 - 5 students
Stanine 5 - 1 student

No students scored in the sixth to ninth stanines. A writing pretest was a formal letter in the letters-to-the-editor vein. An Attitude to Writing Inventory was designed based on the Estes Reading Attitude Scale (see Appendix 1). The Chabassol Attitude Scale in a shortened version was used to establish which students had high needs for structure and low tolerance of ambiguity (see Appendix 2). The prediction was that students with low scores would benefit more from the flexible, untraditional program than would students with high scores.

The subjects were twenty-six students enrolled in an English 11 class, fifteen boys and eleven girls. The suburban school served a middle-class socio-economic area. Because no academic streaming was done, students' abilities were wide ranging. The program consisted of a one hour per week meeting for ten weeks. Certain traditional as well as original activities constituted each lesson. Assignments required students to:

1) read a case study about a boy, take the point of view of one of the characters in the story, and give a first person perspective on the situation
2) write a third person autobiography
3) write a letter of application for a job
4) write a conclusion to a story which had been read orally up to a decisive point in the action
5) write a resumé of a newspaper article and a first person account of one of the participants in the incident
6) write a first person point of view explanation of an enigmatic short story written in the third person.

Other components of the lessons were U.S.S.W. (Uninterrupted Sustained Silent Writing) in students' journals; spelling tests, dictées (students merely wrote sentences read by the teacher), and listening tests; language experience sessions (group discussion led to a common story). Class organization varied from whole group to three groups (based on needs and differentiated assignments) to pairs with a view to peer tutoring and peer evaluation.

At the end of the program, the Attitude to Writing Inventory was readministered and another writing test , again a formal letter, was completed. Students' marks for the course were entered and data was computed using SPSS. In terms of reading scores as predictors, Vocabulary scores and course marks were significantly correlated ($r = .486$ is significant $p = .035$). There was a significant negative correlation between Vocabulary scores and Chabassol Inventory scores indicating that students with high reading scores had low needs for structure whereas students with low reading scores had high needs for structure ($r = -.492$ is significant $p = .032$). Comprehension scores and Attitude to Writing were significantly correlated ($r = .445$ is significant $p = .056$). As for students' attitude toward writing, the difference between means on pre and post tests on positive items was significant at the .03 level. The difference between means on the negative items was significant at the .04 level. Moreover, correlation between writing attitude and course marks was significant ($r = .50$ is significant $p = .029$).

To return to the program objectives, it was difficult to claim an absolute improvement in writing due to the holistic marking system used. However, greater quantity was produced in assignments, writing post-test and journals. Attitude to writing was definitely a key factor in writing achievement. And attitude to writing was improved. Reading achievement was predictive of both writing achievement (Vocabulary scores) and attitude to writing (Comprehension scores). Although the Chabassol Inventory did not predict course marks, the scores were useful in indicating which students needed control and direction, which preferred some degree of autonomy.

Certain personal conclusions were drawn as a result of the experiment. First, the level of maturity and capacity for responsibility in students between ages sixteen and nineteen varies considerably. Second, due to changes in educational policy and economic conditions, students of very low abilities are now retained throughout high school. Standards, therefore, must change as must academic expectations. Third, and most obvious, a ten week program is insufficient for real intervention and for realistic appraisal of progress to occur. Finally, therefore, a need for continuing experimentation exists, research which can benefit both teachers and students.

Writing Attitude Scale

Directions: Read each of the statements below. Please answer each statement by circling one of the four following:

SA if you strongly agree with the statement
MA if you mildly agree with the statement
MD if you mildly disagree with the statement
SD if you strongly disagree with the statement

1.	Writing is for work but not for pleasure.	SA	MA	MD	SD
2.	Writing is a bore.	SA	MA	MD	SD
3.	Writing turns me on.	SA	MA	MD	SD
4.	Writing is rewarding to me.	SA	MA	MD	SD
5.	Creative writing doesn't teach anything.	SA	MA	MD	SD
6.	There should be more time for writing during the school day.	SA	MA	MD	SD
7.	Writing is something I can do without.	SA	MA	MD	SD
8.	Writing is difficult.	SA	MA	MD	SD
9.	There is noting to be gained from writing well.	SA	MA	MD	SD
10.	Sharing written work in class is a waste of time.	SA	MA	MD	SD
11.	There are many thing I would rather do than write.	SA	MA	MD	SD
12.	A person who cannot write well will have trouble doing the everyday things involved in life.	SA	MA	MD	SD
13.	Writing won't get you far in life.	SA	MA	MD	SD
14.	Being able to write well is a great help to people in their schoolwork.	SA	MA	MD	SD
15.	I enjoy writing.	SA	MA	MD	SD
16.	A time will come when people will not need to be able to write.	SA	MA	MD	SD
17.	Writing quickly becomes boring for me.	SA	MA	MD	SD
18.	I like writing more than I like a lot of other things.	SA	MA	MD	SD
19.	There should be more time for writing during the school day.	SA	MA	MD	SD
20.	I like sharing what I write with other people.	SA	MA	MD	SD

STUDENT ATTITUDE INVENTORY *

Directions: Read each of the statements below. Please answer each statement in one of four ways:

SA if you strongly agree with the statement
MA if you mildly agree with the statement
MD if you mildly disagree with the statement
SD if you strongly disagree with the statement

There are no right or wrong answers, so respond with the answer that you think is best. No two questions are the same, although a number are similar. Work as rapidly as you can. Draw a circle around the letters that best express your feelings. If you wish to change an answer, draw a large "X" through the incorrect response, then circle the correct response in the usual way. Your cooperation is very much appreciated.

1. I sometimes worry about the number of decisions a person my age has to make and wish I had more guidance and advice from an older person. SA MA MD SD

2. I think people my age are often concerned with what is happening to their bodies, that is, the physical changes that are occuring, the growth that is taking place, etc., and would like to have some information from a knowledgeable adult as to what is to be expected and what is normal development. SA MA MD SD

3. Sometimes I have some pretty difficult decisions to make and I wish I could go to some understanding adult for help and advice. SA MA MD SD

4. I would be less discouraged at times if I could just discuss some of my problems with an older person. SA MA MD SD

5. I wish I had more information about the laws of this country and how they apply to me. SA MA MD SD

6. I would like to have some advice as to what courses I should be taking next year or some further information or explanation of the courses that I am required to take. SA MA MD SD

7. I would like to have some worthwhile suggestions from teachers or counsellors as to how I could develop better study habits. SA MA MD SD

8. I would appreciate some suggestions from an older person as to how I could make pleasant and acceptable conversation when I am with a social group. SA MA MD SD

* Chabassol, D.J. "A Scale For the Evaluation of Structure Needs and Perceptions in Adolescence," Journal of Experimental Education, 40-1, Fall 1971, 12-14.

9. I think parents should be very clear as to what time their teen-age son should be in the house at night.	SA	MA	MD	SD
10. I'd like to have more personal help from the teachers of certain of my school subjects.	SA	MA	MD	SD
11. I would like some definite suggestions and advice about moral behavior from some understanding adult.	SA	MA	MD	SD
12. I think parents should be very clear as to what time their teen-age daughter should be in the house at night.	SA	MA	MD	SD
13. Sometimes I worry about some aspect of my health and wish that I could go to some understanding adult for advice and information.	SA	MA	MD	SD
14. I wish that I had some suggestions from an older person as to how I could improve my appearance so that I could make a better impression on people.	SA	MA	MD	SD
15. I wish some adult would give me some advice as to how I could become more self-confident and sure of myself when I am with others.	SA	MA	MD	SD
16. I would like to have some advice from some adult on making money, budgeting money, saving money, and using money to best advantage.	SA	MA	MD	SD
17. I wish that there was some older, understanding person that I could talk to about my troubles and problems.	SA	MA	MD	SD
18. I would appreciate adults having more interest in, and concern for, my progress in school.	SA	MA	MD	SD
19. I wish I could express myself better and would appreciate some older person giving me some advice and help in developing a better vocabulary and more effective ways of self-expression.	SA	MA	MD	SD
20. I wish that counsellors in this school would play a larger part in helping us make decisions relating to school work and to other problems as well.	SA	MA	MD	SD